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WESTERN OUTLOOK, by Bill Hosokawa

The press wasn't impressed

WASHINGTON, D.C.—When the American Society of Newspaper Editors convenes in Washington, the White House seizes the opportunity to parade its brightest stars before the journalists. Thus, last week, President Carter appeared at an editors' luncheon to reveal his anti-inflation program and field questions. Jody Powell and Hamilton Jordan, the president's brash Georgian Bobbsey Twins, donned ties, conservative suits and their Sunday manners to share the platform with an unusually subdued Midge Costanza and talk frankly about their shortcomings.



Evern Attorney General Griffin Bell showed up to alternately amuse the editors with his witticisms and baffle them with his corn pone accents. Herewith, some purely personal and subjective impressions of our close encounter:

PRESIDENT CARTER read his speech with an earnestness that bordered on the laborious. He was more effective answering questions off the cuff when his undeniable charm showed through.

And he demonstrated considerable skill in appearing to respond to an inquiry without really saying very much, as when A.A. (Bud) Smyser of Honolulu asked about U.S. policy regarding the Red China-Taiwan dilemma. But if the nation's foreign policy seems stodgy, it may be because Secretary of State Cyrus Vance is an unexciting speaker. Before the editors he compounded his problem by taking the role of the cautious diplomat—little inclined to say anything startling.

We must include in the same category of dullness a couple of gumshoes, Admiral Stansfield Turner, boss of the Central Intelligence Agency, and Judge William Webster of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Still, in view of what's been going on in those agencies, it is somewhat reassuring that they aren't the glib type.

THE MOST EFFECTIVE speaker of all who appeared was a man no longer in government—Bert Lance, the redoubtable former director of the Office of Management and Budget.

Lance, who is about the size of a pro football lineman, apparently believes the best defense is a strong offense. Instead of trying to explain his sometimes curious business practices, he launched a vigorous attack on "careless, erroneous or biased reporting" and cited himself as a victim of the press.

"I think it's worth looking at this kind of reporting," Lance told the editors, "not because this has happened to me, Bert Lance, but because it can happen at all in a nation that prizes itself on justice and fair play. . . . In the absence of self-discipline and internal reform, other groups may find it necessary to step in and subject the press to the same rigorous standards of ethics and truthfulness that the press applies to the rest of us. That threat is called censorship."

EASILY THE SUPERSTAR (I am inclined to use the expression, "among the performers") was Jody Powell, the president's press secretary.

After watching him in action the Washington Post's Sally Quinn wrote that Powell was once "diffident and self-effacing," but after 15 months on the job "his style today is cool, tough, confident and sophisticated."

He was all that as he faced the editors, sometimes amusing, sometimes philosophical, always self-assured. Of the record of the Carter administration and reports of an impending staff shakeup, Powell had this to say: "It is time to periodically review the way you function. We've done some things well, some things poorly. At times we could have been more effective in communicating our priorities to the American people."

After criticizing sloppy reporting practices, Powell observed to the editors: "Your mistakes are based on human frailty. You're lazy when you ought to be more dedicated, indifferent when you ought to be concerned, dumb when you ought to be smarter. We ought to be less inclined to attribute malice."

Not exactly a compliment. But Powell exhibited understanding and insight, both qualities he rarely displayed in his earlier days as press secretary.

HOWEVER, THE BEST show in town is being staged by a skinny little fellow with no government connections. He is a political satirist named Mark Russell playing to packed houses at the Shoreham Hotel. Carter's people have given him fat targets to shoot at, and his barbs pierce them with devastating effect.

If you're in Washington, treat yourself to his show.